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THE CONSTRUCTIVE SIDE OF ENGLISH STUDY.

It was a favorite saying of one of our western educators that English should be taught in every subject in the curriculum, and every subject should be taught in English. This conception of the English class as a kind of "*omnium gatherum*" for miscellaneous information, historical, scientific, literary, and linguistic, so frankly expressed in the dictum quoted, is one that dominates the practice of a large number of English teachers. We are all familiar with the English recitation which comprises a little spelling, a trifle of etymology and grammar, a glance at literary history and biography, a wink or two at literary criticism and composition, a dip into formal rhetoric and mythology, a few minutes of oral reading, a little sermonizing on texts supplied by the classics read, and as much general information as can be crowded into the remainder of the recitation period. It was this agile kind of teaching which so confused Paul Dombey that it was an open question with him "whether twenty Romuluses made a Remus, or *hic, haec, hoc* was troy weight, or whether a verb agreed with an ancient Briton, or three times four was Taurus, a bull." But there is no denying the fact that things go briskly on in a class conducted according to the highly exhilarating notion that "every subject should be taught in English."

There are, however, minds that find the mental jolting involved in such a program somewhat unsatisfying, and would seek in their teaching some point of view to give unity and logical sequence to the mass of heterogeneous material labeled by the general name "English." They believe that the English teacher may touch upon every subject incidentally as may the teacher of physics, chemistry or any other subject, in fact; but they hold that this subject, like all others, must have its dominant purpose, its own peculiar material, and a general method as widely accepted among teachers of the study as is the laboratory method among teachers of science. Every subject in the schools teaches "something about everything and everything about

something." It is the "something," about which we are to learn everything, that differentiates one study from another. What is this particular "something" about which we should learn everything in the English class?

In the present opposition and uncertainty of our ideas on this point, every one has his own answer to the question. The writer believes that one way in which the subject may be unified is by teaching English as a constructive art. Perhaps an analogy between the two arts of literature and architecture may serve to explain what we mean by the constructive side of literary study.

In his *Stones of Venice*, Ruskin speaks of reading a building as one reads a book. We should like to reverse the comparison and speak of reading a book as one reads a building. And how shall one read a building? Examine in the first place, its anatomy, that is, study in their relation to each other its necessary members, or features, the arch, pier, wall, roof, buttress, and apertures. From these elements which give strength, order, and symmetry to a structure and express the intelligence of the architect, pass on to that which adds beauty and displays the feeling of the builder, namely, its ornamentation. "The two virtues of architecture which we can justly weigh," says Ruskin, "are its strength, or good construction, and its beauty, or good decoration." Is it possible to weigh in the same manner the virtues of a piece of literature, to separate in it the structural from the decorative side? Is there, in literature a certain system of concrete thought units used in building up a whole as there are architectural units, the arch, pier, etc.?

Note that the units we are seeking are not units of form but of thought. Grammar and rhetoric have long been busy with the units of form, the word, the phrase, the clause, the sentence, and the paragraph. Less, however, has been done by text-books and teachers with the analysis of the psychological side of expression. Certain types of thought, the general reflection, the syllogism, the abstract idea, have been discussed by rhetoricians, in the departments of exposition and argumentation. Is it possible to find in the more familiar departments of narration and description other thought units or motives which will be of

practical use to the student in both composition and literary analysis ?

Let us see what narrative or descriptive units can be found in the following poem by Longfellow:

A DUTCH PICTURE.

Simon Danz has come home again,
From cruising about with his buccaneers ;
He has singed the beard of the King of Spain,
And carried away the Dean of Jaen,
And sold him in Algiers.

In his house by the Maese, with its roof of tiles
And weathercocks flying aloft in the air
There are silver tankards of antique styles,
Plunder of convent and castle, and piles
Of carpets rich and rare.

In his tulip garden there by the town
Overlooking the sluggish stream
With his Moorish cap and dressing gown
The old sea-captain, hale and brown,
Walks in a waking dream.

A smile in his gray mustaches lurks
Whenever he thinks of the King of Spain
And the listed tulips look like Turks
And the silent gardener as he works
Is changed to the Dean of Jaen.

The windmills on the outermost
Verge of the landscape in the haze
To him are towers on the Spanish Coast
With whiskered sentinels at their post
Though this is the River Maese.

And when the winter rains begin
He sits and smokes by the blazing brands
And old sea-faring men come in
Goat-bearded, gray, and with double-chin
And rings upon their hands.

They sit there in the shadow and shine
Of the flickering fire of the winter night ;
Figures in color and design
Like those by Rembrandt of the Rhine
Half darkness and half light.

And they talk of ventures lost or won
And their talk is ever and ever the same
While they drink the red wine of Tarracon,
From the cellars of some Spanish Don,
Or convent set on fire.
Restless at times with heavy strides
He paces his parlor to and fro,
He is like a ship that at anchor rides
And swings with the rising and falling tides
And tugs at her anchor tow.
Voices mysterious, far and near,
Sound of the wind and sound of the sea
Are calling and whispering in his ear
"Simon Danz, why stayest thou here?
Come forth and follow me."
So he thinks he shall take to the sea again
For one more cruise with his buccaneers,
To singe the beard of the King of Spain
And capture another Dean of Jaen
And sell him in Algiers.

This poem consists of: A description of personal appearance—that of Simon Danz, the old sea-captain—in stanzas three and four.

A description of place—the house and garden by the Maese, and the surrounding landscape—in stanzas two, three, four, and five.

A description of an occasion—the social evening the sea-faring men spend with Simon Danz—in stanzas six, seven, and eight.

A description of mood—the restlessness of the old sea captain—in stanza nine.

Retrospective narrative—the history of Simon Danz previous to the time at which we see him pictured here—in stanzas one, four, and five.

Anticipative narrative—it is hinted in the last two stanzas that the captain will again return to the sea.

We find these same motives, differently combined, of course, in other pieces of literature. These and others determined in the same way are the working units of literature, as the arch, buttress, pier, etc., are the working units of architecture.

Moreover, these various motives are found in life as well as in literature, in our daily conversation with one another. Let us imagine ourselves listening to a group of persons conversing on ordinary subjects. One who has been traveling in foreign countries is describing a celebrated cathedral or the scene from his window in one of the places he has visited. This gives us place description again. A second person has just met an old friend whom he has not seen for years, and is telling how changed he is in looks — another example of the description of personal appearance. Still another of the company is giving his opinion of some man in public life. This is a motive which did not occur in the poem we analyzed: namely character — description. One who is interested in social settlements is describing the way in which the poor live. This is another new motive — description of “mode of life.” A fifth is giving an account of a meeting he attended in the afternoon, another motive — the description of an occasion or an assemblage. It will not be necessary to carry these illustrations further. It may be readily seen that these motives are found in literature because they are units of experience, unorganized in life, but organized in literature into larger and unified wholes. When these elements of literary construction are once understood, the problem of composition is merely that of their effective combination; and the problem of literary analysis is the separation of a piece of literature into its component motives.

It is as important that we learn to analyze anatomically in literature as in botany. A poem is an organic product quite as much as is a flower, and must be taken apart as it was put together, if we hope to understand it structurally. We read the thought of the Creator, as expressed in the plan on which a flower is made, by resolving it into elements common to all flowers, the corolla, pistil, stamens, etc.; and when we attempt to make an artificial flower, we combine the elements of the flower's anatomy according to the plan of the arrangement which we find in nature. To employ a more homely similitude, if we wish to study a garment structurally, as we do when we intend to use it as a pattern, we take it apart as it was put together by

ripping the seams and thus resolving into its structural features as a garment. Similarly to understand the anatomy of a piece of literature, we must first separate it into its component motives and then observe the relation of these parts to each other, the plan by which they are combined. This system of motives can therefore be used for both literary analysis and synthesis.

We have thus far considered only the anatomy of literature. There remains the decorative element which includes the various rhetorical devices and turns of expression with which our rhetorics for the most part occupy themselves, and which lend minor beauties to a well-conceived whole. As the builder first puts his stones into a rude order, and then touches, them into beauty with the graceful and delicate forms he finds in nature—foliage and birds, shells and clouds and waves—so the writer and the student of literature must distinguish the two sides of his art, the constructive and ornamental principles. The tendency, however, among those who profess to teach literature as an art is to put too much stress upon the decorative element—the purple patches, mere verbal and rhetorical refinements—and too little upon the anatomy of the art, the necessary thought units which repeat themselves in literature as do the cube, the sphere, and the cylinder in nature. No one understood better than the Greeks the proper relation of these two principles. “The Greek building,” says Burroughs, “had no ornament, it was all structure ; in its beauty was the flower of necessity, the charm of inborn fitness and proportion. In other words, his art was structure refined into beautiful forms, not beautiful forms superimposed upon structure.” It is because too much attention is directed to the accidental, the decorative, in the study of literature, that the student as a rule finds composition difficult, for the great problems of composition are those of organization of structure. We cannot learn to make boxes by studying their ornamentation, the figures carved or painted upon them. Literature, we believe, deserves a place beside the other arts and crafts, and must employ the same general method, that of construction.

ROSE M. KAVANA.

THE JOSEPH MEDILL HIGH SCHOOL,
Chicago, Illinois.